

# Karaites, Tatars and Vytautas the Great

## Karaites

Upon returning from battle in the Crimea, Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytautas settled the Karaites, both soldiers and civilians (a total of 383 families) in a free area of the city between the two castles in 1398. They were given privileges: they were given land, as well as money to build temples of worship. The soldiers protected the castles and the bridge to the Island Castle. The civilians were scribes, translators, vegetable growers, and were craftsmen and artisans, as well as traders. Small residential quarters of Karaites and Tatars formed in Trakai. A Tatar mosque and Karaite kenessa were also built.

Karaites (Semitic *kara* – to read, study) are an ethnic Turkish group belonging to the oldest Kipchak tribe that came from Central Asia, and which never had its own state. At the end of the 20th century, there were approximately 3,700 Karaites worldwide (in Ukraine, Poland, and Russia). It is estimated there are up to 300 Karaites in Lithuania. Their religion is a branch of Judaism that recognizes the Old Testament. They use Hebrew



A Karaite wooden house with its back sticking out into the street because of a lack of room, and always with three windows – one for God, one for Vytautas and one for a guest.

and Karaite during worship. During the years of Soviet occupation, the Trakai kenessa was the only temple of worship for Karaites in Europe, as all other kenessas in the Soviet Union were closed down.

For more about “Karaite Cuisine” see p. 48

### INTERESTING FACTS

Vytautas the Great looked through the castle window/ And said to the women in Karaite:/ Let not your hearts grieve! I say to you: misfortune will/ Not befall you – I will find the strength to save you.

(Excerpt from S. Firkovich's poem “The Grand Duke's Miraculous Stead”)

The coat-of-arms depicts a two-horned *senek* and *kalkan* shield. Underneath are the gates of the former Karaite fortress *Chufut Kale* in the Crimea.



### English-Karaim glossary

Hello! – Salam/Bazlych  
 Good day! – Kiun' jachšty  
 Godspeed, see you later, goodbye – Kal sav, Bol sav  
 Cheers! – Savluchka/Kieške  
 I love you – Mieñ sieni siuiviam



Karaite women in national costumes, 1991

## Tatars

Tatars were brought to Trakai together with the Karaites in 1398, and settled near the southern and western entrances to the city. They not only guarded the city, carried out their army obligations with each household providing an armed horseman with their own funds, but also helped in diplomatic relations with lands beyond the Volga such as the Crimea and Kazan. Later they raised horses and traded in vegetables. In 1609 a massive crowd of fervent Catholics gathered in Trakai and destroyed the mosque, which was not rebuilt. The Tatars moved from Trakai. Today there are approximately 3,500 Tatars living in Kaunas, Raižiai, and the villages of Keturiasdešimt Totoriai and Nemėžis. Lithuanian Tatars are Sunni Muslim, and do not use their language anymore.



A commemorative coin issued for the 600th anniversary of Karaites and Tatars in Lithuania



Postcard. Artist J. Mackevičius, 1931



Tatar adornment from 16th century coins.



The Lithuanian Tatar layered cake from yeast dough has been made for 600 years. It was a favourite in the manor estate of Grand Duke Gediminas. It is well-known around the world, however the original recipe comes from the Tatars of Lithuania.



Karaite pickles layed out for an exhibition, circa 1935, Trakai.

### INTERESTING FACT

There's an old saying in Lithuanian that states “A Tatar ravioli suits a Bernardine monk's stomach well.” Ravioli with meat, which have been made by Tatars for centuries, became popular among Catholics.

## Vytautas' name

Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytautas occupies a special place in the historical memory of Tatars and Karaites. Great respect is felt for him – they prayed for him in mosques and kenessas, and in the early Middle Ages they wrote legends, poems and songs about him. Many Karaites had a portrait of Vytautas in their homes. There was an celebratory service on the 500th year anniversary of Vytautas' death in Vilnius' kenessa in 1930.

## DID YOU KNOW

The current water level of Trakai's lakes is thought to be 1.8 meters lower than in the 14th century. The Island Castle was built on three islands; swampy areas were filled with rock and gravel in order to create one single island.

## Trakai Island Castle 2

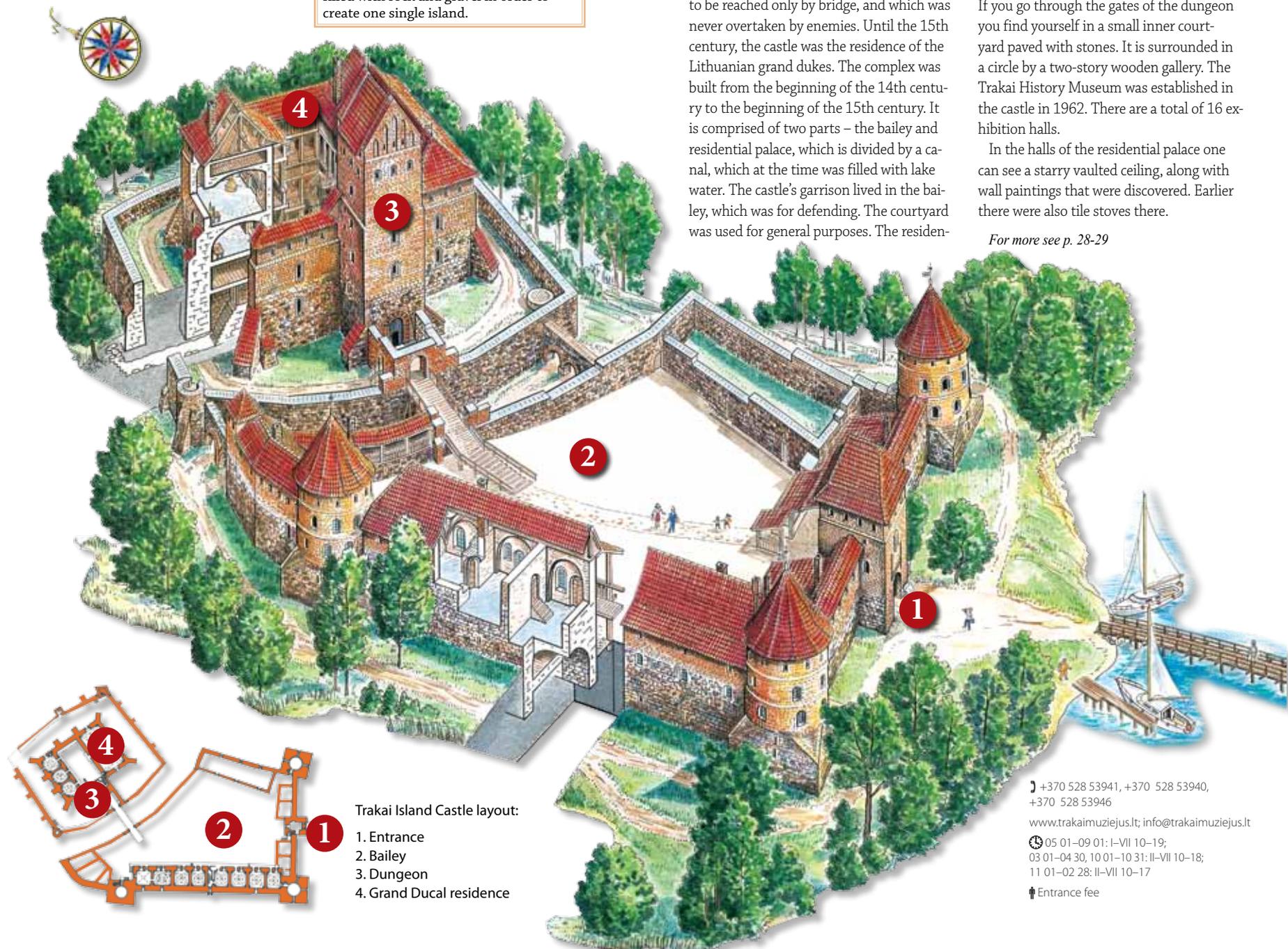
Karaimų St. 43C

The castle, built on an island in Lake Galvė, is a unique Gothic defensive complex, able to be reached only by bridge, and which was never overtaken by enemies. Until the 15th century, the castle was the residence of the Lithuanian grand dukes. The complex was built from the beginning of the 14th century to the beginning of the 15th century. It is comprised of two parts – the bailey and residential palace, which is divided by a canal, which at the time was filled with lake water. The castle's garrison lived in the bailey, which was for defending. The courtyard was used for general purposes. The residen-

tial palace was comprised of two parallel corpuses that were joined by walls, as well as a defensive tower (called a dungeon) in the front. Shooting slots were created in the upper level of the tower and both corpuses. If you go through the gates of the dungeon you find yourself in a small inner courtyard paved with stones. It is surrounded in a circle by a two-story wooden gallery. The Trakai History Museum was established in the castle in 1962. There are a total of 16 exhibition halls.

In the halls of the residential palace one can see a starry vaulted ceiling, along with wall paintings that were discovered. Earlier there were also tile stoves there.

*For more see p. 28-29*



Trakai Island Castle layout:

1. Entrance
2. Bailey
3. Dungeon
4. Grand Ducal residence

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🕒 05 01–09 01: I–VII 10–19;  
03 01–04 30, 10 01–10 31: II–VII 10–18;  
11 01–02 28: II–VII 10–17

👤 Entrance fee